

ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

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The mind is capable of anything –
because everything is in it,
all the past as well as all the future.

Joseph Conrad
Heart of Darkness, 1899 AD
London, UK, Earth

Getting there was impossible—strictly by invitation only. And there was nothing particularly special about the place either, just two requirements: zero gravity, and the complete and utter isolation from everyone else onboard the spaceship. Tripping out is definitely NOT a spectator sport.

I got the computer program from two friends—*friends* still feeling like a relatively loose term given the way it all went down. See, during lunch one of them pours this bitter extract derived from something (I can only assume) he'd been growing somewhere in the farms into a paper cup and shoves it into my hand. “Drink me,” he says with a laugh. The other shushes me when I ask what the terrible tasting shit is. All a bit heavy-handed, right? Not exactly inciting and inviting me into a safe and comfortable first out-of-body experience. One of them pings the program to me as they slip away, smiling like they'd just gotten away with murder. Confused as all hell, of course I download it immediately.

As far as I can tell the application is nothing more than some simple modifications to a very basic program. One of the first things you learn as a kid is to have the Ship direct you where you want to go by projecting a white line onto the floor which only your eyes can see. I've seen modifications to the standard white line before, but nothing like this:



Usually your private path takes the most direct possible route through the complicated hallways of the Ship, but now, as I follow the curious prints, they slither wildly around. More than a few times the trail suddenly switches direction, slowly bringing me closer and closer to the heart and core of our great Ship.

But the most disconcerting aspect of it all is that damn white rabbit. The faint pitter-patter comes often. I can't say that I ever actually see the thing, but round just about every turn there's the flash of white tail in the corner of my eye. Augmented now and then by a loud THUMP, THUMP, THUMP—and half the time I don't know if it's from the program or my own beating heart—yet the hope of catching more than just a glimpse of annoying Mr. Cottontail drives me further. My natural curiosity, helped along with the sights and the sounds of the program, all of it calls me on and on. Eventually the meandering tracks lead to a nondescript door before disappearing abruptly, like they were never there in the first place.

As I stand before the door that's when I really feel the drugs hit. I'm not sure if that was part of the program or not. The tetrahydrocannabinols in the cocktail had taken hold rather quickly—that much I knew from prior experience—possessing and caressing me while I was just beginning to negotiate the way here, and probably the main reason I started chasing that damn rabbit in the first place. But the heavier stuff had surely found its targets now too; my racing pulse from the manic wild goose chase speeding the molecules to bonds with receptors across what felt like my entire nervous system. My whole body tingled, from the hair follicles on the top of my head right down to the tips of my toes.

Suddenly the door turns into a mirror—by itself, totally not my doing. I carefully examine the reflection staring back at me. I look normal except for the pupils of my eyes, which are as open and black as I've ever seen them. I lean forward as I peer into the deep black holes lurking behind my two eyes, the black abysses sucking in all of the light around them. I feel anything but normal, like my body no longer fits quite right. It's the condensation from my slow breaths building on the looking glass that finally breaks the long spell... me, the dumbass, peering at myself in a mirror in the middle of some hallway. The door silently opens and I hurry inside.

From the outside it looked like nothing special, but this room is a trip! It's an impressively large, half-sphere dome, empty and quiet, the smooth black walls merging seamlessly into the high dome of the ceiling. The floor is normal (also the smooth, obsidian black inner skin of the Ship) but suddenly the dark walls start flashing with a random, disjointed array of imagery that I didn't put there; sort of like a daydream but far less coherent. The fragmented pictures make little sense. As I slowly spin around to take in the confusion of it all, a noise quickly rises from all around me: it's a steady pitter-patter falling like endless rain.

I figure all of this probably has something to do with that program I downloaded earlier. The walls seem to be a visual representation of neural activity, I think, somehow filtered through the implant in my brain and projected all around me. A few dense orbs of bright light slowly orbit like they're my electrons, while waves of color percolate up and down the high walls. Soon more and more bright orbs join the chaotic dance, the balls of light whizzing around me faster and faster as they appear to draw closer and closer. This is when I realize that the Ship-generated 3D is on: the images on the walls interacting with the implants in my eyes to create an effect that seems tangible, graspable even—despite the fact that I know that nothing is physically in there with me. As the energy continues to accumulate around me the points of light slowly congeal into a condensed galaxy, linking together in a stormy network of miniature lightning bolts. It looks just like a nebula—the birthplace of the stars and everything else. Finally the milky cloud of energy totally engulfs me. It's like I'm floating in the eye of the great galactic storm at the very beginning of time.

It's calm for a few moments before I think it:

Is this my brain on drugs?

I command the persistent patter of rain to subside and it listens. The room becomes peaceful again, totally quiet; the walls fading into blue sky and a warm beam of concentrated sunlight streaming down from a small sun high up on the ceiling. I suppose that means that not much was going through my head—if this really was my brain—but you tell me, because like a dream it's all pretty subjective. I unanchor my foot implants from the floor and softly push off, floating upward, finally letting myself be free. When I glance back down a few seconds later the black floor has disappeared! The dome is now a great hollow sphere.

My thoughts meander as I carelessly float. It's hard to keep anything in my mind for too long. Soon enough the percolating colors begin to swirl into great ugly patterns all around me, mixing together into a jumbled, incoherent mess that never resolves. It's like experiencing a dream which you can't seem to understand. I need clarity to figure out what is going on around me, yet I need guidance to achieve this clarity. For a moment I feel like I'm trapped inside a letterbox, postage already paid in the form of a heavy dose of psychedelics, nothing left to do but wait for an intergalactic postman to come and take me away across the Universe.

Then, just as I thought I might lose myself forever, sounds of laughter. Suddenly I am no longer alone—two others are here with me. I watch as they tumble blindly, somersaulting through the air as they make their way towards me. The walls now project a bright orange-yellow sunlight which shines all around me, bringing comfort along with some much needed warmth.

“Think about it, man,” one of them says to the other—totally ignoring my existence. “Einstein...the theory of relativity. The fabric of spacetime can warp because of differences in relative velocity. It’s a law of nature...”

For a moment the walls of the sphere shudder, a barely perceptible ripple. *What the hell is going on in here?*

“Relativity explains everything!” he declares with finality.

“What’dya mean?” the other drawls lazily, decidedly unaffected by the words or underlying idea.

“T i m e d i l a t i o n!”

The phrase resonates, stretching out far longer than it should.

“Okay... I got that part. But time dilation *what?*”

“That’s what this is all about!”

“What’s *this?*”

“All of *this*... This Ship, our journey, us. Everything.”

“Okay—but what does time dilation have to do with anything???”

The question is still ringing through my open ears when the place suddenly goes dark. Then images of broken light explode on every inch of surface around me. The blazing illumination is like a million suns; harsh, too much to process at once. It’s so bright that my suddenly tearing eyes force themselves shut.

“We’re up to a good fraction of the speed of light right now!” his voice now booms, reverberating all around the great hollow sphere. “Do the math... 3,000 years at 1/3rd the speed of light is over 50,000 years back on Earth. We’re already tens of thousands of years ahead of them!”

“So what?” the other asks evenly when I finally crack open my eyes. He was still clearly unaffected by the concept, or the visual effects. The intense light subsides.

“So what???”

“Yeah, so what? Spit it out already, ya mug.”

Even though the two of them are now floating right next to me, they still act like they don’t see me at all. It’s all very curious. Yet I try my best to hold onto his words.

“The whole point of building this Ship and speeding it away from Earth was to protect the human species, right? They said that spreading out to other solar systems was the only way to protect ourselves, to get all of our eggs out of one basket, blah, blah, blah. But what’s protecting all the humans back on Earth from... themselves? It’s *time dilation*. Time has been moving fast there and relatively much slower for us.”

“I get that point already. So what?”

“SO WHAT? Earth was dying, man! It was nuthin but a worn-out shell when we left it. We killed 99% of all species on the planet, all shades of life across the ocean as well as the land. And we were only around for just the tiniest sliver of time! Fucking idiots. It only took 200,000 some-odd years, but we did it in the end... stupid, selfish gits that we are. Seriously—how much longer do you think they had left? It was a colossal, on-going environmental catastrophe, fueled by a truly insane society still stuck in the middle ages! Those people were doomed, man. Doomed!”

The room had suddenly grown dark and chilly as I floated there listening.

“You still haven’t made a point,” the other said steadily. The breath from his words lingered as a cloud in the cold air.

“My point is that this is all a sham... one giant load of Utopian bullshit!” Speaking quickly, the words are flowing out of him like a restless wind. “We were never going to travel light years to some other planet! The time it would take to go that far is absolutely mind-numbing. The whole point of this journey was to get the Ship moving really fast, then go right back where we came from! That’s what we’re really doing—using time dilation. It’s been 3,000 years for us but it will have been tens of thousands of years more back on Earth. All we have to do is outlast a dying civilization! When we get back it’s the great reset, the one the world needed all along. The Earth finally gets the people it deserves, a people who understand limitless undying love and appreciation. A people who will love it, and care for it back!”

A wave of warmth breaks through the cold with a crack of bright light, but it’s gone all too soon as he continues.

“There was no other way to protect Earth, you see. You can’t just change human nature with a snap of the fingers. You can’t force people to change their purposes in life, to erase these carefully crafted self-identities, to throw everything away just like that—even when group destruction is assured if the status quo remains! How many times has it happened in history? A society gets stuck, then they die. And most of the people back on Earth were brainwashed and scared... an absolutely terrible combination.”

When he’s finally finished the other guy shakes his head sadly.

“Really?!? That’s the great theory you HAD to tell me about?”

The room immediately grows lighter but it’s still quite cold. It’s quiet for a second before they both look directly at me, almost as if on cue.

“What do you think, Winston?” they ask together in a singsong voice.

Personally, I was still reeling! The darkness of the return-to-Earth idea made me shudder again as I thought about it; the blast of cold cynicism washing through my mind, flowing down my limbs in pools of sorrow, and locking my body in place like it was encased in a paper-thin layer of concrete. I feel pressured, stunned even—not ready for their attention in any way whatsoever. I shake my head but no words can come out.

The other frowns with another stern shake of his head. “Well, I for one think you’re an idiot! Seriously... That is one of the stupidest things I’ve ever heard. Your *Great Theory of Spacetime*, in a nutshell: an untold massive fortune was spent, all that time and money in the most ambitious project ever put on by mankind... expressly advertised as *the* grand attempt to spread human life across the Universe—and you think it was all just a put-on to outlast the fucking idiots back on Earth?”

Waves of joy roll through me as he somehow gives voice to my exact thoughts on the matter. The dark idea was finally gone now, chased away for good, nothing but a fast-fading nightmare. Relieved, I could float freely again, back in the comfort of a happier place and trying to hold onto that feeling. I take another deep breath, trying to relax further. Then the serenity breaks—like the magnificent stained glass behind the altar of a mighty cathedral shattering into a million useless pieces from a single thrown stone.

“You know what?” the first spits angrily. “You’re the fucking idiot, idiot! You need to shave that mustache too... You look like a goddamn walrus!”

I slam my eyes closed, gulping down more deep breaths. Concentrating inwards, trying to regain my equilibrium (and no longer giving a damn about was happening in the room around me), I again try to relax. If I didn’t take control that instant it felt like I could be lost forever in a bad dream. It was that helpless feeling of being caught watching yourself in a surreal, slow-motion nightmare and not being able to do a damn thing about any of it.

The only sounds come from my slow breaths. After the spell of darkness fades it feels peaceful once more. When I finally open my eyes I find that I’m once again all alone in the great dome. The only light comes from the glow of the stars now twinkling brightly all around the great sphere. It’s like a million eyes are on me, but at the same time they feel so very far away. The bothersome thought lingers with me for a moment, a restless, nagging anxiety, but I manage to push it down and away. As my mind and body

continue to relax the walls turn the bright blue of a tropical ocean. It feels like I'm floating just below the surface of a turquoise sea, looking up through the rippling water at the afternoon sun. Many more shades of blue appear and soon great fractal waves of all hues are rolling in like turbulent surf, mixing together in great swirling eddies. Relaxed and at peace, the colors and shapes which dance before me continue to grow, patterns inside of patterns inside of patterns, in more colors than I thought I could imagine. I am utterly transfixed by what my mind can create.

But, to my ultimate surprise, the final culmination of the great mixing, swirling ocean of patterns within patterns isn't more color, but the purest white light that you could possibly imagine. An iridescent glow made up of the entire spectrum of visible light shines all around me, seeming to shine right through me; no color at all but made of all possible colors at once, nothing and everything all together. I manage to drop the last remaining conscious thoughts from my mind and, for a moment (who really knows how long?) only light drifts through my brain—the ultimate source still unknown. The rambling, incoherent streams of words and ideas that usually preoccupy my thoughts are totally gone, no longer drifting through my opened mind. They are my oppressive rulers no more. I have no problems or concerns here, no more vexing anxieties or worries. There is just light and peace.

“Winston! Hey, Winston!” they call me on and on.

No one is here though, I know it now. It's just me floating in this empty space—a space as infinite in possibility as the Universe itself. I realize that nothing can affect me now... if I can keep this frame of mind. No blinders, imposed from within or from without, and no more defensive walls. No ego, no negativity. It's just me and my opened mind. Nothing's gonna change my world.

We are conduits feeding on the light of the Universe. It's no color at all but made of all possible colors at once, nothing and everything all together. And it all comes down to this light; our existence now, and our existence forevermore. Nothing's gonna change my world.

THE END

You have the power to strip away many superfluous troubles located wholly in your judgement, and to possess a large room for yourself embracing in thought the whole cosmos, to consider everlasting time, to think of the rapid change in the parts of each thing, of how short it is from birth until dissolution, and how the void before birth and that after dissolution are equally infinite.

Marcus Aurelius
Meditations, 170 AD
Sirmium, Roman Empire, Earth

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